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## **Assessing the Sociology of Sport: On Globalisation, Communication and Sport Research in Korea Reflection on the trajectory of the Sociology of Sport in Korea**

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While the sociology of sport was first introduced to South Korea in the late 1960s, it was not until the 1980s that this academic subject attracted significant academic attention (Lim, 2000). The growing academic interest in sport sociology during this period is not unrelated to the fact that the Asian Games and the Olympic Games were going to take place in Seoul in 1986 and 1988 respectively. Hosting these two sporting events prompted Korean academics to examine the social value of sport more seriously. In particular, international sport science conferences organised in association with these competitions played a pivotal role in facilitating a social scientific enquiry into sport within Korean academia (Park, 2010). Since then, increasing numbers of researchers began to investigate sports from a sociological perspective, and this eventually led to the foundation of Korean Society for the Sociology of Sport (KSSS hereafter) in 1991 (Lee, 2010). Two years later, the inaugural issue of the *Korean Journal of the Sociology of Sport*, an official journal of KSSS, was published.

In 1994, Professor Burn-Jang Lim of Seoul National University published the *Introduction to the Sociology of Sport* (Lim, 1994), and the publication of this text had a significant impact on the diffusion of a sociology of sport module throughout universities in South Korea. Before the appearance of this book, serious academics relied on reading North American texts such as *Sport and Social Order* edited by Ball and Loy (1975) and the *Social Significance of Sport* written by McPherson, Curtis, and Loy (1989) in order to satisfy their intellectual curiosity (Lee, 2010). Because no Korean translation of such texts were available, the dissemination of fundamental concepts in the sociology of sport was possible only within an elite academic circle. Lim's publication of the *Introduction to the Sociology of Sport* changed this situation fundamentally. Not only did this book comprehensively cover major theories and key issues in the sociology of sport, it also effectively provided relevant cases and examples from Korean sporting practice (Park, 2010). Hence, it was no surprise that many lecturers adopted Lim's text as core reading for their courses. In effect, the publication of his book made the sociology of sport a more accessible academic subject in South Korea (Lee, 2010).

Another key publication for Korean sociology of sport is arguably KSSS' edited volume, *Sport and Social Theory* (2012). This is the first and, at the time of this writing, the only sociology of sport textbook devoted to sociological theories written by Korean authors. It should be noted that most articles published in the *Korean Journal of the Sociology of Sport* from its inauguration to the early 2000s were predominantly empirical in character and were mainly underpinned by the principles of structural functionalism (Lee, 2010; Park, 2010). Research papers adopting critical and interpretive theories were few and far between. In comparison, more recent studies tend to utilise a diverse range of theoretical and methodological frameworks. Yet, even in these more recent articles theoretical consideration tends to be given at a rudimentary level and the established theoretical assumptions are rarely challenged. Such academic practice appears to be a major obstacle that constrains further development of the sociology of sport in the country. Within this context, *Sport and Social theory* featuring the collaborative efforts of 13 leading Korean academics, is certainly a valuable addition to Korean academia providing a key academic reference for those researchers seeking a more critical theoretical interpretation of their findings. Only time will tell whether this book will have an enduring impact on the direction of sociology of sport in Korea.

## **Assessing and challenges of the Sociology of Sport in Korea**

In 2010, KSSS organised a special academic seminar in celebration of its twentieth anniversary. One of the major themes at this meeting was a reflection on the state the sociology of sport in Korea and its future challenges. Two established academics, Professor Jong-Young Lee of the Korean National Sport University and Professor Jin-Kyung Park of Kwandong University, reviewed the research traditions within Korean sport scholarship over the previous two decades and offered their outlooks for the Korean sociology of sport. In his presentation, Lee (2010) suggested that KSSS should be more concerned with practical issues such as promoting community and school sports and monitoring existing sport policy. In short, he advocates for a policy focused approach that can yield visible outcomes with a practical value. By contrast, Park (2010) highlighted the importance of theoretical conceptualisation of sport in Korean society. He further notes that the ultimate aim of Korean sociology of sport should be the construction of theory that reflects unique social and political contexts through which Korean sport develops.

Contrasting the two positions, I am personally and intellectually aligned with Park's proposition although this is not to suggest that Lee's arguments should be dismissed. I am particularly in favour with the view that Korean sociologists of sport should seek to develop original theories that take account of the unique historical and political experiences that Korean society, and Korean sport more specifically, have undergone. I believe that a social scientific enquiry inevitably involves methodological and theoretical nationalism (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002) and that the conceptualisation of the meaning and value of sport within the Korean cultural and political system is the key task for clarifying an academic identity of the Korean sociology of sport. However, as I mentioned in the previous section, theory is arguably the least developed area within Korean sociology of sport over the past twenty years. This poses major challenges to the advancement of the field in South Korea. Consequently, it is KSSS' duty to foster a culture of scholarship that stimulates theoretical discussion on sport lest Korean researchers be overly dependent and constrained by positivism and empiricism. Under the right conditions the sociology of sport in Korea has the potential to develop new and contextually specific, theoretical frameworks which will provide greater insights into sport, culture and society.

## **Future directions for the Sociology of Sport: on Globalisation, Communication and Sports Research in Korea**

In view of the academic challenges noted earlier, I would suggest two potential research agendas: globalisation and communication. Globalisation is arguably one of the major social currents that have been reshaping the nature and structure of the world today, and sport as a form of global culture has attracted immense academic attention (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009; Maguire, 2005; Sage, 2010). As the interplay between the global and the local is increasingly visible in Korean sporting culture (Lee, Jackson & Lee, 2007; Lee & Maguire, 2009), it is necessary to conceptualise Korean experiences of global sports and its implication systematically. In this regard, critical investigation of global mega sporting events is particularly relevant to the Korean academic context. It seems that South Korea is obsessed with hosting sport mega events. The country has hosted a number of international sport competitions since the 1980s and the 2018 Winter Olympic Games will be held in the South Korean district of Pyeongchang. Curiously, despite such frequent occurrences of global sporting events on Korean soil, relatively little research has been conducted to

provide critical and independent examinations of the socio-cultural and political legacies of the events. While this is a void it is also an opportunity. Instead of jumping on the mega event bandwagon that celebrates the glossy exterior and presumed benefits of sport mega events, Korean sport sociologists need to investigate the implications of hosting objectively. They also need to make an effort to theorise Korea's semi-peripheral (or semi-core) state experience of the global sporting competition. Additionally, research into the representation of global, national, and regional identities displayed through these sporting occasions is also important. With specific reference to the social, cultural and historical contexts in which the events unfold, a close examination of identity politics contested within them will also bear valuable information that will enrich theoretical understanding of globalisation in general and global mega events in particular.

Communication and sport is yet another burgeoning research area in the field of sociology of sport (Wenner, 2012). Generally, a sign system and symbolism in culture is one of the major research foci in communication studies, and a number of academics have examined the a signifying process in sport communication and the ideological structure which underpins this practice (Cobley, 1996; Gee, 2009; Maguire, et al., 2008). It should be noted that symbolism plays a significant role in the communication system of Korean culture, and that Korean language itself consists of a variety of metaphors and expressions with social and political connotations (Cha, 2009). *Hangul*, the Korean alphabet, consists of unique characters and letters, and the meaning system and narratives structure of Korean traditional literature has been extensively investigated using semiotics (Kim, 2004). Likewise, the Korean sport media tactfully utilises such linguistic resources to construct implicit meanings with an ideological undertone (Lee, 2009). Notably, Korean sport media texts contain the elements of the postcolonial influence which require critical interpretation in order to uncover embedded nuance of the language accurately (Kim, 2013). This implies that the language of sport in the media offers a rich resource for investigation, and that a close examination of the sign system and signification process in the Korean sport media can make a useful and original contribution to sport communication research. This research may also involve developing analytical tools specifically designed for exploring the Korean communication system. In relation to this, the development of a modified version of semiotics and discourse analysis which takes account of the unique linguistic features and usages of local vernacular would be a significant academic accomplishment though this will be no easy task.

The proposed future research directions do not provide an exhaustive list of potential research topics. Instead, they must be seen as a mere starting point for galvanising a theoretically oriented research culture in the Korean sociology of sport. It is hoped that the propositions made in this article prompt both Korean sociologists of sport, and the readers of the IRSS in general, to continue to engage in a constructively critical and rigorously theoretical debate on sport in society.

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